

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 /026 W
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R 190908Z MAY 75
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3473
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 1822

EXDIS

BEIRUT ALSO PASS BAGHDAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, US, SY
SUBJ: DISCUSSION WITH GENERAL SHIHABI

1. SUMMARY: NIO HOSKINSON ACCOMPANIED BY AMBASSADOR MET WITH COS SHIHABI FOR A WIDE RANGING INFORMAL DISCUSSION ON THE NIGHT OF MAY 17. THE GENERAL MOOD WAS RELAXED AND FRIENDLY. TOPICS COVERED INCLUDED US ME POLICY REASSESSMENT, SYRO-IRAQI DISPUTE, AND MEPC, INCLUDING NEED FOR MAJOR ROLE FOR PLO AT GENEVA. SHIHABI SAID SYRIA WOULD LIKE TO FORM JOINT MILITARY COMMAND WITH JORDAN BUT ASSERTED NOTHING HAS COME OF THIS. SHIHABI'S RESPONSES WERE CAREFULLY PHRASED AND GAVE THE IMPRESSION OF REFLECTING SYRIAN OFFICIAL THINKING RATHER THAN JUST HIS OWN PERSONAL VIEWS. THE DISCUSSION LASTED OVER TWO HOURS AND CONCLUDED WITH AN INVITATION BY SHIHABI FOR HOSKINSON TO RETURN TO DAMASCUS AND SEE HIM AT ANY TIME. END SUMMARY.

2. HOSKINSON OPENED BY EXPLAINING THAT HE WAS ON A TOUR OF SEVERAL MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES AT THE REQUEST OF DIRECTOR COLBY. HIS PURPOSE WAS TO LEARN AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE FROM DISCUSSIONS WITH EMBASSIES AND LOCAL OFFICIALS ABOUT PRESENT

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MIDDLE EAST SITUATION SO THAT ANALYTICAL INTELLIGENCE CON-

TRIBUTIONS TO CURRENT US POLICY "REASSESSMENT" WOULD BE THE BEST POSSIBLE AND LAY BASE FOR WISE POLICY DECISIONS.

3. SHIHABI'S FIRST, AND SEVERAL TIMES REPEATED, POINT WAS THAT SYRIA IS ANXIOUSLY AWAITING THE RESULTS OF THE US REASSESSMENT. EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON THE US DECISIONS. IF NOTHING HAPPENS TO MOVE THE DIPLOMATIC SITUATION, THEN "OTHER MEANS" EVENTUALLY WILL HAVE TO BE EMPLOYED. HE PRESSED FOR SPECIFICS ON THE TIMING OF US DECISION MAKING PROCESS. AT LEAST TWICE SHIHABI EXPRESSED OPEN DOUBT ABOUT THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE REASSESSMENT AND INDICATED THAT "SOME PEOPLE" WERE CONCLUDING THAT IT WAS NO MORE THAN A CONVENIENT DIPLOMATIC PLOY TO GAIN TIME. AMBASSADOR REASSURED SHIHABI THAT ON THE CONTRARY USG ENGAGED IN A VERY SERIOUS AND IN-DEPTH STUDY OF ENTIRE RANGE OF ITS MIDDLE EAST POLICY AND THAT THIS REQUIRED CONSIDERABLE TIME TO DO RIGHT.

4. SHIHABI WAS OBVIOUSLY PREOCCUPIED WITH THE DETERIORATING STATE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN SYRIA AND IRAQ. SEVERAL TIMES HE CAME BACK TO THIS SUBJECT AND EXPRESSED HIS CONCERN THAT THE SITUATION COULD WORSEN. ALTHOUGH HE DID NOT SPECIFICALLY SO STATE, SHIHABI SEEMED TO BE INDICATING ACTUAL FIGHTING BETWEEN SYRIA AND IRAQ COULD NOT BE RULED OUT. HE APPARENTLY HAD BEEN SEIZED WITH THIS PROBLEM FOR THE PAST FEW DAYS. SHIHABI WAS EMPHATIC, HOWEVER, IN STATING THAT WHATEVER HAPPENED IT WOULD NOT AFFECT SYRIA'S DECISIONS ON AND ATTITUDES TOWARD ARAB-ISRAEL PEACE NEGOTIATIONS. SYRIA, HE SAID, IT STRONG ENOUGH TO DO WHAT IT DECIDES IS IN ITS INTERESTS. SHIHABI STRONGLY DENIED THE VALIDITY OF RUMORS AROUND DAMASCUS THAT NUMBER OF ARMY OFFICERS HAD BEEN ARRESTED FOR CONSPIRING AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT WITH THE IRAQIS. HE SAID NO CONCLUSION HAD BEEN REACHED YET CONCERNING RECENT BOMBING IN DAMASCUS.

5. SHIHABI EXPRESSED SYRIA'S GENERAL PREFERENCE FOR RECONVENING THE GENEVA PEACE CONFERENCE, BUT WAS ALSO QUICK TO ADD THAT SYRIA WOULD CONSIDER OTHER DIPLOMATIC APPROACHES IF THEY APPEARED USEFUL. TO DATE THEY WERE VERY MUCH IMPRESSED BY THE SINCERITY OF SECRETARY KISSINGER'S EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE PEACE. THE PALESTINIANS MUST BE INVITED

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TO GENEVA AND PLAY A MAJOR ROLE, BUT HE HAD NO CONCRETE SUGGESTIONS ABOUT HOW THIS COULD BE ACHIEVED. WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE SYRIA-PLO JOINT COMMAND AS A POSSIBLE VEHICLE FOR PALESTINIAN PARTICIPATION, HE SAID THE COMMAND ITSELF WAS "STILL UNDER STUDY" AND SEEMED TO INDICATE THAT IT WAS, AT LEAST FOR NOW, ON THE SHELF. THE SOVIETS, HE THOUGHT, HAD RECENTLY COME AROUND TO A "MORE RESPONSIBLE" POSITION ON GENEVA AND ARE CONCERNED TO SHARE THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR

ACHIEVING PEACE AND AVOID THE ONUS FOR FAILURE.

7. SPECIFICALLY CONCERNING THE PALESTINIANS, SHIHABIE STRESSED THAT THIS WAS THE HEART OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI PROBLEM AND EVERYTHING ELSE WAS SECONDARY. ARAFAT IS A MODERATE AND CAPABLE LEADER. HIS POSITION, HOWEVER, WILL BE SERIOUSLY WEAKENED UNLESS THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM IS DEALT WITH SOON AND NOT IGNORED AS IT IS NOW. THE WAY TO STRENGTHEN ARAFAT IS TO DEAL WITH HIM AND GIVE HIM SOMETHING HE CAN USE TO JUSTIFY HIS POLICIES. SHOULD THE ISRAELIS INITIATE A MILITARY CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE FEDAYEEN IN SOUTHERN LEBANON, "OTHER ARABS" WOULD SUPPORT THE FEDAYEEN. THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR RECEIVING MORE ADVANCED WEAPONS SUCH AS SA-7S WOULD REST WITH THE ISRAELIS WHO STARTED THE FIGHTING, NOT THE ARAB STATES THAT SUPPLIED THEM. IN THIS CONNECTION SHIHABI DEPLORED THE DEEPENING LACK OF PUBLIC ORDER IN LEBANON.

8. IN RESPONSE TO A QUESTION, SHIHABI SAID SYRIA WOULD LIKE TO FORM A JOINT MILITARY COMMAND WITH JORDAN. NOTHING AT ALL, HOWEVER, HAS COME OF IT. SYRIA REMAINS PREPARED TO HELP JORDAN DEFEND ITSELF EVEN DESPITE SYRIA'S OWN PROBLEMS. THE ISRAELIS ARE TRYING TO MAKE SOMETHING OF IT BUT KING HUSSEIN'S VISIT TO DAMASCUS AND SUBSEQUENT LOWER LEVEL SYRIAN VISITS TO AMMAN, INCLUDING ONE BY SHIHABI, HAVE RESULTED IN NOTHING CONCRETE.

9. SYRIA AND EGYPT, ACCORDING TO SHIHABI, HAVE PATCHED UP THEIR RELATIONSHIPS. HENCEFORTH THEY WOULD WORK TOGETHER IN THE CAUSE OF PEACE.

MURPHY

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: MILITARY PERSONNEL, DIPLOMATIC DISCUSSIONS, FOREIGN POLICY POSITION, PEACE TALKS, LIBERATION FRONTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 19 MAY 1975
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: GolinoFR
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1975DAMASC01822
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D750175-0614
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1975/newtext/t19750537/aaaabgub.tel
Line Count: 146
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION SS
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: GolinoFR
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 18 JUN 2003
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <18 JUN 2003 by BoyleJA>; APPROVED <19 JUN 2003 by GolinoFR>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
05 JUL 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: DISCUSSION WITH GENERAL SHIHABI
TAGS: PFOR, US, SY, PLO, (SHIHABI, HIKMAT)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006